

A woman with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and a vibrant blue skirt, stands on a tree stump in a forest. She has her right arm raised towards the sky. The forest floor is covered in fallen leaves and branches, and the background is filled with tall trees and a soft, hazy light.

A Novel

Appalachian Song

Michelle Shocklee

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Praise for Michelle Shocklee

“A riveting historical romance. . . . Shocklee masterfully weaves mystery and romance in this spellbinding study of the horrors of xenophobia and the bravery of those who stand up to it. This is a timely and expertly crafted tale.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Count the Nights by Stars*

“Captivating. . . . Rich in history and mystery, *Count the Nights by Stars* is a novel that will teach and inspire.”

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY

“That is our mission, dear. To see people for who they are beneath the pain. Beneath the sin. To see them as God sees them: a beautiful creation, with plans and purposes only he knows.’ This is my favorite quote from *Count the Nights by Stars*, a moving historical fiction that explores darkness as well as the beauty that can emerge from it when the right person takes on the purpose of seeing people for who they are beneath the pain.”

T. I. LOWE, author of *Under the Magnolias*

“In her latest compelling novel, Michelle Shocklee brings to light the long history and hidden forces of human trafficking as well as our country’s treatment of immigrants, the poor, and those we view as different from ourselves. *Count the Nights by Stars* is a timely reminder that caring for our neighbor is a privilege that requires our time, patience, and resources, as well as the courage to step outside our comfort zones, freeing our hearts to leap in faith.”

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award-winning author of *Night Bird Calling*

“Shocklee’s masterful descriptions thoroughly transport the reader to this unique time and place while bringing to light an issue both historically troubling and heartbreakingly current. *Count the Nights*

by Stars is a beautifully written reminder of our need to see—and be seen—by both God and others.”

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT, author of *If It Rains*

“Experience Tennessee’s Centennial Exposition, presented by Michelle Shocklee as a sensuous feast in *Count the Nights by Stars*, then look deeper as two women, one in the late nineteenth century, the other in the 1960s, uncover the lavish celebration’s dark, disturbing secret. The story’s main setting, the Maxwell House Hotel, is a vivid character itself in its splendid heyday and decline, but it’s the heroines who call it home, Audrey and Priscilla, who give this story its true shine, as each seeks to forge a life of purpose, integrity, and love, despite the obstacles she faces. With a mystery that unfolds with irresistible suspense, I predict late nights of page turning for fans of Michelle Shocklee’s books and new readers alike.”

LORI BENTON, Christy Award–winning author of *Mountain Laurel* and *Shiloh*

“Shocklee beautifully unveils Frankie’s past while developing Lorena’s awareness of inequality. Though set years ago, this title resonates today, and many struggle with the same issues and questions of racial reconciliation. With its haunting message of forgiveness, this is a must-buy for any Christian or historical fiction collection.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Under the Tulip Tree*

“Shocklee elevates the redemptive power of remorse and the grace of forgiveness in this moving saga.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Under the Tulip Tree*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* . . . is an inspiring story of incredible courage in horrific circumstances, of faith, forgiveness, redemption, love, and friendship.”

CHRISTIAN NOVEL REVIEW

“Get ready to fall in love with characters who step from the pages of history straight into your heart. With exceptional skill, Michelle Shocklee weaves a tale of betrayal and redemption that will long reside in the reader’s memory. I cannot recommend [*Under the Tulip Tree*] highly enough!”

TAMERA ALEXANDER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *With This Pledge* and *A Note Yet Unsung*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* takes readers into the heartache of the broken Leland family during and after the Great Depression. The story of Rena Leland captured me from the first page, and I loved reading about her journey as one of the writers for Roosevelt’s Federal Writers’ Project. *Under the Tulip Tree* moves seamlessly between two time periods, beautifully capturing the relationship between Rena and a former slave woman whose powerful story begins to heal the entire Leland family.”

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Curator’s Daughter* and *The Winter Rose*

“As a fictional account of one of FDR’s slave narratives, *Under the Tulip Tree* gives testimony to not only the social injustices of a country fueled by slavery, but the wounds that would last well beyond the field hospitals of war. In some ways, Rena and Frankie’s conversation is one that America should have with itself: one that faces the pain head-on and brings a true spirit of repentance. Then, and only then, will we see healing begin.”

ALLISON PITTMAN, author of *The Seamstress*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* is a brilliant and authentic look at the power of story to break through the complicated entanglement of racial tension. Brave, authentic, and moving—Michelle Shocklee takes readers on an adventure of historical significance that is sure to leave them with hope. A grace-filled and beautiful reminder that every story—and every person—matters.”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, Carol Award-winning author of *Freedom’s Ring* and *The Tea Chest*

“*Under the Tulip Tree* left an indelible stamp on my heart. A story of pain, forgiveness, and restoration—Frankie and Rena’s story will forever remain a testament to the power of love . . . and God’s peace in the midst of heartache.”

TARA JOHNSON, author of *All Through the Night* and *Where Dandelions Bloom*

Appalachian Song



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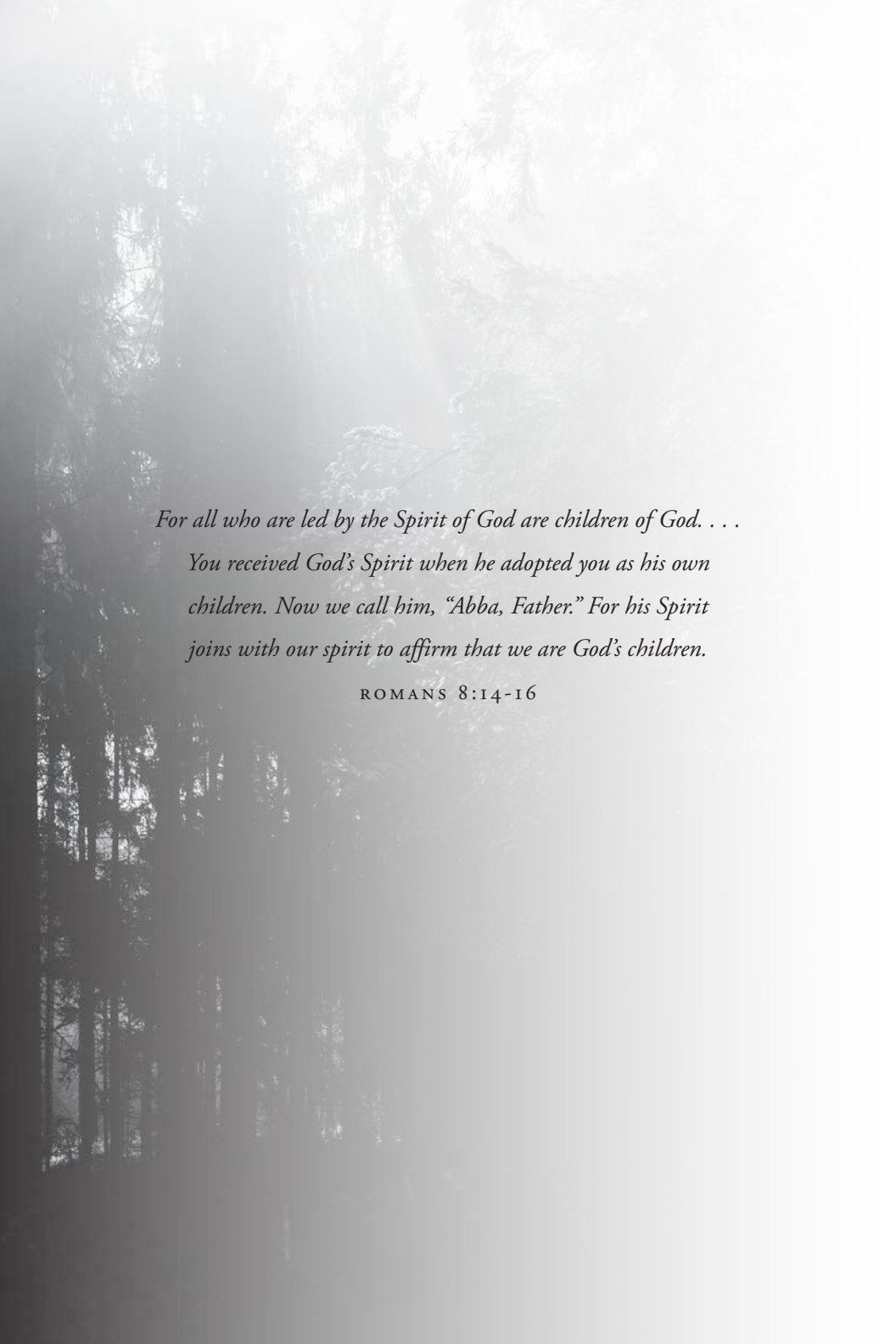
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For JRS

And in loving memory of John Warren



*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. . . .
You received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own
children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit
joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children.*

ROMANS 8:14-16

Prologue



APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS
NORTH CAROLINA
FEBRUARY 1, 1943

My heart thumped hard beneath Mama's thin coat while I waited for Amos at our secret place. Holes in the chinking of the old trapper's cabin let in frigid mountain air, with another storm brewing by the looks of heavy gray clouds in the sky, but I couldn't leave for Tennessee tomorrow without seeing Amos one last time.

Tears blurred my vision.

I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave North Carolina, but mostly I didn't want to leave Amos. Pa said Amos was a good-for-nothin' kid, but I loved him. He was the first boy I'd ever kissed. Last week after Pa announced we were movin' to Tennessee, I begged Amos to marry me.

"We can wed soon as you turn sixteen," he said, holding me while I cried in his arms right here in this cabin.

"But that's almost two years," I sobbed. "I wanna be your wife now."

He'd gently lifted my chin with his thumb until I looked up at him. "I'm right anxious for you to be mine, too, but I'm only seventeen. In two more years, I'll be a man and can take care of

you proper-like. 'Sides, if the war don't end and I gotta join the Army after my birthday, you'd be all alone till I got back. It's best to wait."

He was right, of course. Still, I couldn't leave without him knowing how much I loved him.

Peering out the frost-covered window of the cabin, I waited. Icicles hung from the eaves, and the forest beyond wore a fresh blanket of white, lovely yet dangerous should someone get turned round and head deeper into the mountains. I used to wish I could get lost in those woods and disappear, but all that changed when I met Amos Cole last summer. His laughter and steadiness filled in the holes Mama's death and Pa's neglect had left in my heart. I knew I'd love Amos forever.

It wasn't long before I saw him, his red plaid jacket a bright spot in the snowy world. Tall and handsome, the sight of him always took my breath.

I hurried to the door. I'd taken care with my hair and worn Mama's best dress. I didn't want Amos to think of me as a fourteen-year-old girl today.

His face was red from the cold wind, but he smiled when he saw me. "You look real pretty." He stomped snow off his boots before entering.

"You do too."

He chuckled, then looked around. "It's cold in here."

The cabin had been abandoned for ages and only held a table, one rickety chair, and a narrow log bed frame with a stained straw tick.

"We can make a fire," I said, indicating the stone fireplace.

"I can't stay long. Pa needs me to chop wood before the storm gets here."

His words reminded me our time together was short. My own pa was expecting me to help with the packing.

I swallowed hard. “Amos,” I began, more nervous than I’d ever been. “I . . . I love you.”

He reached for my hands and squeezed my icy fingers. “I love you too.”

I gathered my courage. “I want to be with you. Now. Here, in our secret place.”

The widening of his eyes told me he understood my meaning.

“I don’t think we should.” He cast an uneasy glance to the bed. “It ain’t right.”

I put my fingers to his mouth to shush him. “I’m leavin’ tomorrow and don’t know when I’ll see you again.” Tears slipped down my cheeks. “Please, Amos. Make me yours. For always.”

We stared at one another, the magnitude of what I was asking between us.

Just when I began to fear he might turn and leave, Amos pulled me against his chest, where his heart thundered.

“I love you more than anything,” he whispered before his lips met mine. Not in the chaste, gentle way we’d always kissed before, but with a passion I hadn’t even known existed.

When he led me over to the bed and loved me, I knew I’d never be the same.

I became a woman that day.



One



DEEP IN THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS

TENNESSEE

JUNE 15, 1943

A gunshot pierced the morning stillness of the holler. Ol' Clem commenced to barking up at the house, sending a flock of sparrows fluttering to the safety of a stand of blooming tulip poplars.

Bertie straightened from where she'd been stooped over a row of young tomato plants and turned in the direction of the sound. The same green hills and tree-covered mountains she'd seen the entirety of her fifty-two years of life filled the view, offering no answers as to which neighbor had fired the weapon. While it wasn't uncommon to hear gunshots in their part of the Appalachians, the time of day—nearly noon—made it so.

Another shot sounded, followed by a third.

"Someone huntin' this late in the mornin'?" Sister Rubie, who'd been working at the opposite end of the garden since sunrise, came toward Bertie where she stood with her ear tuned to the echoing report. Sound carried for miles in the hills, ricocheting off damp earth and ancient oaks, until one couldn't be certain from whence it first came or where it might find a resting place.

“I s’pose.” Bertie, who’d misplaced her hat at some point that morning, noted her sister’s face was amply shaded from the bright morning sunshine by the wide brim of her bonnet, thus avoiding the redness Bertie was certain her face sported. It wasn’t the first time she’d suffered her own neglect and it wouldn’t be the last. “Most critters are tucked in the shade of the brush by now. Seems foolhardy to be out huntin’ in the heat of the day.”

“Sounded like it came from Mooney Point. Aren’t there new folks livin’ over thataway?” Rubie looked to the north, but their own land was all that was visible from the garden, not far from the two-room cabin Papa’d built for Mam after they married in 1870.

Bertie nodded. “I haven’t become acquainted with them yet but heard tell a family with a passel of young’uns moved into the Tucker place some months back.”

They listened a while longer, but no more shots were fired.

“We best get indoors, Sister.” Rubie’s keen gaze studied Bertie’s face. “You’re beginnin’ to look like one of Papa’s McIntosh apples.”

Bertie huffed. “One would think after all the years of workin’ the garden I’d have sense enough to keep up with my head covering.”

“Tisn’t that you aren’t sensible, dear. You simply have too much on your mind. I know you’re worried ’bout the Alister babe, even if you won’t admit it.”

Her empathetic words unlocked a load of frustration.

“Ramsey Alister is actin’ foolish, and I don’t mind sayin’ it.” Bertie punctuated her opinion with a firm nod. “There’s no cause for him to take that sweet young bride of his to Knoxville. I’ve delivered half a dozen breech babies, all of ’em healthy. You mark my words. Them city doctors will cut Sharalyn open without so much as a by-your-leave, with Alister parked out in the waitin’ room, banned from being by her side. Wouldn’t it be better for me to work with God and nature and bring that child into the world without maiming its mother?”

The stiff, starched bill of Rubie's home-sewn bonnet lifted until sparkling blue eyes, the hallmark of the Jenkins family, were visible. "Certainly it would be best for you to attend the birth, Sister, but Ramsey is as strongheaded as his pa. There's naught else to be done but pray the wee one arrives safe and sound with no harm to Sharalyn."

The statement held simple truth. There was naught else to be done. Ramsey Alister was the babe's father and had made his decision.

Still, Bertie's hackles wouldn't settle. "What gets my goat is the man tellin' me I'm too old to midwife for our mountain folk anymore. Why, I was there when he himself came into the world, blue-faced and silent. I don't take credit for breathin' life into him, as that's God's job, but the Lord and I have been workin' together for nigh on forty years. I'll stop deliverin' babies when he tells me to and not a moment sooner."

With a gentleness none of the other Jenkins siblings possessed, Rubie laid her hand on Bertie's cheek. "It is still God's job, Sister, even when you aren't there to assist him."

The mild rebuke hit its mark.

Bertie's rigid shoulders dropped. "Papa always said you were wise beyond your years, even as a young girl."

"Papa also used to take a switch to my legs when I expressed my *wisdom* a bit too loudly."

Their shared laughter worked to soothe Bertie's ire. "We best get to the house and help with the noon meal. Otherwise—" she winked—"Jennie might take a switch to us both."

Bertie led the way down a narrow path, around mounds of cucumber and squash plants, past the peas and onions, before she came to a rusted metal gate. The paling fence Papa had built decades ago kept out deer, wild hogs, and other critters large enough to destroy the life-sustaining garden, but there wasn't much

they could do about rabbits and other varmints small enough to squeeze beneath the gray, weathered slats.

As they made their way to the house, Bertie did a mental inventory of everything she and Rubie had accomplished that morning, as well as work that awaited them on the morrow. Not nearly as big as it had once been when Papa and Mam's large family lived at home, the garden and everything it produced provided life and liberty to Bertie and her four sisters. Only the corn and wheat fields held greater importance, and that because a good portion was cash crop. Although the sisters' farm produced nearly everything they required to live, a few necessities like sugar, soda, coffee, and salt must be purchased at the general store in Cosby Run, an hour from the homestead by mule or half that if they went on foot through the woods.

Bertie chuckled to herself, hearing Papa's booming voice in her mind. "*Life and liberty, you say?*"

Yes, sir, she gave silent answer.

Five aging spinsters living alone in the mountains of Tennessee fought for life and liberty every single day. Papa'd been gone for twenty years now. His sons were good to see to their sisters on occasions of great need, but Bertie, Rubie, Jennie, Amelie, and Bonnie couldn't rely on their brothers for the day-to-day needs of their farm. Thomas and Chad had farms and families of their own, as did Catie—or Catherine, as she liked to be called now—the only Jenkins sister who'd married and moved away from Brier Creek. The five sisters who remained on the family land worked hard to preserve the independent yet solitary life they'd chosen.

Bertie paused and surveyed her surroundings with gratitude.

The two-room cabin where Mam and Papa raised eleven children. The barn, corncrib, smokehouse, gristmill, and springhouse filled with crocks of butter, cream, and milk. She and her siblings used to hide in the small building on hot summer days

long ages ago, dipping their bare toes in the cold mountain water. Hogs lazed in their pens while chickens clucked about on a never-ending search for bugs and lizards. Bees happily buzzed among wildflowers, garden plants, and even Papa's apple orchard, where several varieties were just beginning to bloom due to a late freeze. The tiny pollinators eventually made their way to the half-dozen hives Rubie tended with unhurried care each day. Bertie's mouth fairly watered at the thought of the fresh honey they'd enjoy now that the mountains were once again alive with glorious blooms.

Theirs was a good life, indeed, if unconventional in the eyes of outsiders.

When she and Rubie reached the house, the usual daily activities of their sisters greeted them. Bonnie stood near the springhouse with hands deep in a washtub set over a low fire despite her recent flare-up of arthritis—Bertie made a mental note to make her sister some chamomile tea to ease the joint pain—while Amelie pinned damp handmade skirts, blouses, and underthings on a line to dry. With eleven children, Mam had Papa fix a sturdy clothesline as close to their water source as possible. Though just the five sisters occupied the homestead now, laundry was still done outdoors unless frigid winter days kept them inside.

Jennie, the eldest at sixty years, looked up from where she sat on a bench on the porch churning butter. "You hear the shots?"

Bertie and Rubie mounted rock steps and joined Jennie in the shade of the covered outdoor area where the sisters often took their work, sewing, or even meals during the warmer months.

"Rubie thinks it came from Mooney Point." Bertie sat in a wooden rocker, crafted by their father years ago, and fanned herself with her apron. "Odd time to be huntin', we figure."

Jennie glanced her way and frowned. "Alberta Mae, where is your bonnet? Your face is as red as—"

"One of Papa's McIntosh apples. I know."

“You’ll be sorry come mornin’.” Jennie’s thin lips pinched. “Rub some aloe on it so it won’t blister.”

Bertie clamped her mouth shut. She wasn’t a child in need of Jennie’s mothering. She was, after all, the family member who did most of the doctoring.

Jennie served a noon meal of cold mutton, applesauce from last season’s apples, and biscuits. Later, while Bertie slathered an aloe salve on her sunburned skin—not because her bossy sister said to but because everyone knew aloe soothes sunburns—her mind drifted to the cause of her distractedness that morning.

Concern for the Alisters had occupied her mind since Ramsey knocked on the cabin door the previous day to inform Bertie they no longer required her services as midwife for the impending birth of their first child.

At the last checkup, Bertie found that Sharalyn’s baby hadn’t turned as it should. She’d massaged the mother’s huge belly to no avail and proceeded to explain the process of a breech birth to the frightened couple. Yes, it came with risk, she’d told them, but every birth did. A bottom-first baby could still enter the world naturally; they’d just need to be especially vigilant in monitoring its progression and heartbeat. The young parents, anxious but willing to trust Bertie, agreed. Bertie went home to prepare a special birthing kit with items she’d need for a breech delivery that was sure to commence in the next week and had it waiting by the door.

Then Ramsey’d shown up without a hint of apology and said he was taking his wife to the city for the delivery.

“How many babies has Ramsey Alister birthed?” she muttered as she settled in a chair on the porch with a lapful of knit stockings in need of mending. “None. How many babies have I helped bring into the world? Too many to count. But nooo, Bertie don’t know what she’s talkin’ about when it comes to *his* baby. Them city doctors know better than Bertie.”

Her one-sided conversation would have continued had Clem's ears not perked up just then. He lifted his head and emitted a low growl from his place at her feet.

"What's ailin' you, boy?"

Bertie followed his intense gaze, fixed on the wooded area past the corncrib. Something moved in the brush, but her eyesight wasn't as good as the big yellow dog's was, even at ten years of age.

"It's probably just a deer. Cats and bears ain't gonna come callin' this time of day."

Despite her droll declaration, Clem raced off the porch, barking as he passed the corncrib and disappeared into thick foliage. Bertie hoped there wasn't a polecat waiting for him. That dog had been sprayed more times than she cared to deal with.

His barking quieted a moment later, yet whatever was in the brush hadn't run away.

The figure moved again. Was that a person?

"Hello? Is someone there?" Bertie set her mending on the plank floor and stood. "Come on out. No need to be unneighborly."

Jennie appeared in the open doorway to the kitchen, hands covered in bread flour. "Who are you talkin' to?"

"There's someone in the bushes over yonder." She indicated the spot with her chin.

Jennie squinted in that direction. "I don't see anyone." She gave Bertie a look, as though she thought sun sickness might be the culprit.

A thud sounded. Like something hitting the ground.

Clem commenced barking again, but this time he came out and stood with eyes fixed on Bertie for several beats before he returned to whatever hid in the bushes.

"We best find out what's got that dog worked up fore he barks himself hoarse."

Bertie and Jennie left the shade of the porch and made their

way past the log corncrib, empty and ready for a new crop come harvest. When they poked through the foliage, both women drew up short at the sight before them.

Clem stood over a girl, not more than thirteen or fourteen years old, collapsed on the ground.

“What on earth?” Jennie exclaimed.

Bertie knelt beside the girl and smoothed long honey-colored hair from a pretty but pale face. “She’s fainted.”

With experienced eyes, Bertie took note of several clues. Swollen breasts. A slight bulge beneath the homespun dress. Although the stranger didn’t appear to be more than a child herself, Bertie was certain a babe grew within her womb.

“We best get her to the cabin, out of this heat,” Bertie said.

When she slid her arm beneath the girl’s shoulder, a warm, sticky substance met her hand. She pulled it away to see bright red staining her skin.

“Good gracious,” Bertie breathed. “She’s bleeding.”

Jennie knelt on the opposite side of the unconscious girl and together they carefully rolled her over so Bertie could examine her.

She tugged the loose neck of the blood-soaked dress and eased it down until an ugly, oozing, perfectly round wound was revealed in the flesh of the girl’s thin shoulder.

Bertie gasped, but she knew her eyes didn’t deceive her.

“What is it?” Jennie asked.

“She’s been shot, Sister,” Bertie hissed. “This wound is fresh.” Her gaze darted to the woods behind them. Normally so familiar and peaceful, they suddenly seemed dark and sinister.

Who could have done such a ghastly thing? One of their neighbors? An outsider?

She met her sister’s bewildered gaze.

“Whoever did this,” she said, her voice low and alive with fear, “could still be out there.”

